



## Ethical engineering

### The future of human nature

Jürgen Habermas

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This little book is a translation from the German of three pieces based on lectures given by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas in 2000 and 2001. It demands a great deal of the reader unfamiliar with philosophy, as it draws on the work of many major thinkers in Western philosophy and, in particular, examines the changes in philosophical thinking that have occurred since Kierkegaard.

The first section poses a question about a question: “Are there postmetaphysical answers to the the question: What is the ‘good life?’” In other words, in the absence of a common belief in an absolute external authority, how can one arrive at ethical and moral decisions? Habermas’ examination of this question lays the groundwork for his main theme, which is our self-understanding as an ethical species.

Habermas begins his foundational section on “the good life” with a discussion of how morality, ethics and justice are related to one another. If I understand him well, he draws a connection from personal morality, to a social consensus on what is ethical, to justice, which includes the instantiation in law of that consensus. He then addresses the question of how one decides what the good life is, in an era when absolutes are no longer credible. If it is no longer possible to prescribe the good life, how is one to know what to do? As a prerequisite, such decisions require that one is capable of entertaining such questions responsibly. However, people also depend on society to help them develop and maintain this capacity. Habermas contends that in a democracy this dependency of individuals on society to enable them to become fully human implies the need for “ethically conscious conduct” rather than “narrow-minded

self-empowerment.” “Right” ethical self-understanding, therefore, does not reside in an absolute, but “can only be won in a common endeavour.”

Habermas points out that contemporary philosophers of ethics tend to concern themselves with methodologic rather than practical matters: that is, they examine the processes we might use to arrive at a solution to the question of how to live a good life, but avoid prescribing specifics. But this distance from practice is impossible to maintain when “ethical self-understanding ... is at stake *in its entirety*” (author’s italics). Habermas holds that this is the current situation in human genetic science: what has been “‘given’ now shifts to the realm of [technologically enabled] artefacts and their production.” He concludes this section with the comment that “Philosophers no longer have any good reason for leaving [disputes about the ‘good life’ arising from new technologies] to biologists and engineers intoxicated by science fiction.”

Under the heading “Moralizing human nature,” Habermas draws on the perspective developed in the previous section to examine the question of genetic manipulation, particularly the currently available technologies of preimplantation genetic diagnosis and human embryonic experimentation. He asks whether we may consider

the genetic self-transformation and self-optimization of the species as a way of increasing the autonomy of the individual? Or will it undermine our normative self-understanding as persons leading our own lives and showing one another equal respect?

He argues that a person whose genome has been altered in embryo will be impaired in his or her capacity to be an equal and autonomous member of society.

In subsequent sections, Habermas explores with subtlety and rigour the lines of thought suggested by section headings such as “The moral limits of eugenics.” He subjects his intuitions — that there is something disgusting about tinkering with embryos and something worrisome about manipulating our genome — to the crucible of critical examination, distinguishing and developing the implications of various aspects of reproductive technology.

One of his more readily understood ideas is to introduce the question of implied consent:

Would the embryo, had it been able to develop to the point of deciding, have consented to the procedure to which it was subjected?

He emphasizes the significance of the distinction and tension between the *use* of hu-

man beings and the dignity implicit in regarding human beings as ends in themselves. Perhaps most of all, Habermas is interested in promoting and joining in the discussion he sees as the essential process in arriving at ethical and just social decisions in this area.

One emerges from this discussion with the conviction that these are not decisions to be left by default to industry and governments, which are liable to be driven by concern with economic success at the expense of human values.

In its consideration of ethical issues



surrounding science and technology in relation to the human genome, *The Future of Human Nature* always returns to concrete current applications, specifically preimplantation genetic diagnosis and embryonic research. It does not consider the issues of abortion or non-human genetic manipulation, nor does it indulge in speculations about the vague threats posed by future possibilities (although Habermas warns us against being oblivious to them). It makes a clear distinction between medical interventions for which the question of consent has been carefully attended to, and interventions for which such consent is not even contemplated.

Working in this focused area strengthens the force of Habermas' arguments, driving them to the conclusion that, whatever decisions we make about experimentation with and use of human embryos now, these decisions are not to be taken lightly and have far-reaching implications for what it will mean in the future to be human.

This book is also a rich introduction to current ethical thinking in Europe and to the relevance of philosophy to society. It is replete with references to relevant current and past literature in this area, although these are primarily restricted to the Western philosophical tradition and current European work.

In a postscript written in January 2002, Habermas notes the difference between European discussions of *whether* to proceed with human genetic experimentation, and North America debates, which in his reading jump over the step that links ethics and justice in order to discuss *how* to proceed. He also acknowledges that the ideas in the present book are far from the whole story: "My impression is that we still have not reflected deeply enough."

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## Lifeworks

### Perfect strangers

Photography is a broad medium. Whether used to create individual still images or strung together in series to create movement, photographs are able to both document reality and convey emotion under the headings of journalism and of art. Demonstrating this complexity of expression was part of the goal of *Strangers, the first Triennial of Photography and Video*, held at the International Center of Photography in New York City from September 13 to November 30.

The title *Strangers* is meant to reflect the revival of "street photography," whereby artists leave the studio and engage with strangers to incorporate them into their images. *Strangers* is also meant to refer to the global union of the participants in this show. The curators brought together 100 works by 40 artists from 20 countries, including many not previously exhibited in the United States. This effort was announced by the organizers' declared intention to "bring our audience an illuminating vision of where visual culture is headed, and to inspire debate and discussion about where it might go next."

In recent work by the highly influential American photographer Philip

Lorca Dicorcia, strangers are used to create what might appear to be a staged performance. His photographs are set in one location on a street in Havana, and are part of a larger body of work that helped redefine street photography. By using lighting arrangements that one might expect to see on a movie set or in the theatre, he is able to create the mood of a movie still. He waits and watches as people pass by and interact in natural ways, and then captures a decisive moment that is highly narrative. These moments blur the distinction between the casual and the contrived. The viewer is unsure whether these images are real moments or elaborate constructions by technicians and actors.

Dutch artist Julika Rudelius creates a similar feeling in his video *Train*. Rudelius recreates a voyeuristic moment by shooting his video through a crack in the seat-cushions on a train. Through the two bands of upholstery we see the moving mouths and hands of teenage boys as they share stories of their sexual experiences, often in vulgar language. This is an undeniably familiar moment: we have all watched strangers interact, eavesdropping on their stories, interpreting their subtle body language,



**Chien-Chi Chang.** From *The Chain*, 1998. Gelatin silver print, 152.4 cm × 101.6 cm.

and enjoying their actions and reactions. This turns the stranger into a spectacle — a point that English artist Julie Henry also makes in her video *Going Down*. Henry reverses the roles of